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THE LAND OF LASSES FEW





THE LAND OF LASSES FEW

A TALE OF
THE CANADIAN PRAIRIES

BY

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CHAPTER I

LIKE a sudden rush of steam from an engine, the children poured noisily from the Ragington Church schools—lads and lasses from three to thirteen years of age, strong and puny, bold and timid, all eager to breathe the playground breezes directly four chimed out the welcome hour. The boys tossed one another's caps over the wall, or roughly pushed the girls about, while here and there a couple of pugnacious urchins rolled over in the puddles regardless of apparel or appearances. Some wistful little pinched faces seemed already tired of a weary world, and more than one of those rickety bairns to be found in manufacturing districts, where mothers serve the tyrant loom, hobbled about on crutches.

The grimy old mill opposite, redolent of oil and shoddy, belched forth smoke in heavy clouds. Window curtains in the West Riding woollen district require changing once a month, and a spotless morning collar is generally shady before

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nightfall. The very sheep seem unanimously black or dingy grey, and the foliage of the scraggy trees and hedges is a mere apology for green. The murky pall hangs all the week over everything, slightly lifting by Sunday afternoon, but settling down with its smuts and darkness ere the working week is in full swing.

Little care the Ragington youngsters for the stifling smells, nor do they seem to miss the smoke-hidden sunbeams. The love of brass, inherited from their shrewd and busy parents, is engrained in their mercenary little natures very early, and the clatter of machinery is sweet music to the Yorkshire artisan. Home comfort and healthy children are sacrificed, so that the wife may weave and the bairns mind or fettle at the mill.

Into many of the houses in the town five times the wage of a south-country labourer go every week, but they are not so home-like, while the babies sicken and pine away, instead of growing rosy-cheeked and plump within reach of mother's apron strings.

By the classroom stove stands the infant-mistress with a frown on her pretty face, her arms in their favourite attitude, folded behind her back. A strong, well-set-up young woman on the borderland of thirty, to whom a headache is an unknown quantity, and a day's illness never indulged in. For fifteen years, summer and winter, wet and fine, through snow or gale, she has plodded to and fro between her home at one end of the town and these familiar schoolrooms.

Ruth Evans has almost everything that a reasonable young person in her position can

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desire. She is passing rich on ninety pounds a year, with some hundreds in reserve for an old-age pension. Her home is peaceful, and mother and sisters, despite their devotional formula, never do anything they ought not to do, or leave a single thing undone that a far more exacting sister could demand.

Vicars and curates, sometimes inclined to be tyrannous or interfering, have learnt the worth and masterful ways of Madam Ruth, and she is left undisputed sovereign in her own domain. The wandering inspectors, whose surprise visits hang like a sword of Damocles over less competent servants of Church and State, treat Miss Evans as their equal or superior, and report invariably, "This school is excellent in its discipline and in the attainments of the pupils."

Added to all these good conditions, the young lady herself is as fine a specimen of a healthy Englishwoman as you could find in a radius of twenty miles. A rather square forehead, with plenty of dark hair above it, tumbled in a sort of crest that would look untidy with anyone else, but suiting her style of beauty better than would smooth-groomed tresses; a straight shapely nose, firm but kindly mouth, grand straightforward dark blue eyes, and teeth that need no dentist tinkering about their sound and polished crowns; her waist of the true Venus of Milo proportions, suggesting a scorn of corsets, and her walk graceful as an Egyptian water-carrier: she paces the floor of her classroom deep in thought.

"Oh, doesn't the world seem dull and flat, with nothing whatever to grumble at," would be a

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suitable refrain, judging from the setting of the infant-mistress life. She is sick and tired of the monotony of it all. "I wish something would only happen," she exclaimed sometimes, "even a tragedy or an earthquake, anything to break the dull round, the trivial task to which we seem fated in this grey and dismal village; I am in danger of hating the dear little innocent babies who are brought in batches every fresh term for me to cook into smart accomplished little men and women. What a wilderness of babies they would seem if all that have been taught their A.B.C. and 'twice times' under my care, passed in procession before me!"

"Down in the dumps, Ruth? Cheer up, old lady," said a bright little brunette, shaking the drops from her ulster as she came in, for a soaking Scotch mist now deepened the gloom outside.

"Just a wee little bit weary of it all, Topsy. Nothing in particular, but everything in general. I'm growing old and striking root here, like a thing that vegetates, while the great world outside lives and moves and has its being," sighed the schoolmistress.

"Poor old lady," laughed Topsy; "and here am I as merry as a cricket, with an empty purse and shabby clothes, ~~no relatives who care to remember~~ the existence of a mere milliner and dressmaker; and, to complete the miseries, I'm on the market again among the unemployed."

"Lost your place again, Topsy?—that is five situations in the last three years, and fifteen years find me getting grey in the same Church school service. Several of my early batches of infants have settled down into houses of their own, and

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they bring me their dear little woolly-headed babies to bless, as though I had become a veritable patriarch. What has the trouble been about this time, Topsy?"

"Telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, of course, as usual. An ancient maiden of five and forty or fifty wanted a bonnet trimmed to suit sweet seventeen, and when asked for my opinion I said it would look ridiculous. I know my duty to my employer, who stood close by with a servile smile on her face, should have made me tell a real large polite lie. But unless some honest people tell these silly-old women how they spoil the little remains of comeliness they possess by the wrong choice of clothes, how are they ever to learn the truth? I didn't want to hurt the poor thing's feelings, I'm sure, and after the first shock she took it very well, and the bonnet is to be made more after my taste. But my precious mistress, who is never so happy as when she is sacking somebody, turned me adrift the same evening. That's the long and short of it," said Topsy.

"Chiefly short, my little woman," replied her friend. "You are short in stature, short in temper, short in the length of your engagements, but short and sweet too. Silence is golden, and speech only silver."

"And in this case merely a matter of copper," laughed Topsy. "There's my fortune," pouring out a dozen coppers in her lap. "A lot of nasty fines reduced my wages to a few shillings. I was in debt at the confectioner's half a crown, and the lodgings swallowed up the rest. Not a very brilliant outlook, is it, Ruth? — my character

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shattered, my eyes going silly with sewing, and my capital severely limited."

Ruth paced several times to and fro before replying again; then, having evidently resolved on her line of action, she placed her strong hands on the narrow shoulders of her friend, so much more poorly clad than her own, looked earnestly into the eyes reddened with overwork; and scanned the anæmic face of the little slave of the female fashion market.

"Topsy, there is a tide in the affairs of men—and why not women too?—which taken at the flood leads on to fortune, and to-day the tide for you and me may flow into broader and freer channels. Long ago we decided to be as David and Jonathan—rise or fall together, sharing good or evil fortune, regardless of obligations or the thoughts of other people. Since the time we left school, and I continued as pupil teacher, while you went out as sewing-maid in a grand family, we have stuck to our bargain. All these long years you have worked harder, at just as difficult work, and for nearly twice the hours every week that I have done. The results have been different, but not owing to your fault or my cleverness. Naturally I am stronger in body, not so apt as you to give away my odd shillings to every needy soul, and have not been a rolling stone. So it happens, little partner, that our firm has a nice round sum of money snugly put aside for a rainy day, and it is a mere coincidence that it rests there in my name."

"I'm listening, Ruth, but I'm not concerned about your savings, so please don't talk about money. I've come to you for advice, and a good

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scolding, and perhaps a little petting to finish with."

"Don't interrupt me, Topsy, I'm in dead earnest. We have both been industrious long enough, and now we need a real long holiday. I shouldn't care a bit going off by myself; I want you with me, and nobody else will do; so accept the situation as my lady travelling companion, and let us go in search of adventures like a couple of feminine Quixotes."

"Well, whether you mean it or not, and whether I could take your lovely offer, I can't say," replied the excitable Topsy; "but, anyhow, let's pretend it's real, and in the gloaming here plan out the travels. It sounds like heaven, Ruth. I have only been one week-end trip in my life, all the way to Blackpool in a crowded excursion train; it rained all the time we were there, and we came back twice as tired as when we started. Shall we go far?"

"All the way to Liverpool first," said Ruth.

"So far so good; they say it's a fine city, and it's new to me; any more?" inquired Topsy, entering into the affair like a child with a new game.

"We have tickets and boxes full of clothes, and are shown by the stewardess into a cosy little cabin on a Canadian steamer."

"Oh!" exclaimed Topsy, jumping to her feet. "Go on," she cried, sitting down again.

"And right across the Atlantic Ocean we speed away full steam, leaving foggy old England far away behind us."

"I'm making a picture of it in my mind, Ruth; and we turn in at the mouth of the St.

Lawrence, don't we? I just remember that much geography."

"And we pass Quebec and jump ashore at Montreal; and before going out on to the distant prairies"—

"Where the buffaloes and prairie dogs and Indians and rattlesnakes and all those things are; I've read all about them in novels. Go on, Ruth."

"Before we go there we must just run down as far as Niagara," continued the schoolmistress, in the most matter-of-fact way.

But Topsy had wound herself up to too great a pitch of excitement, after the row and anxiety of the day; she toppled down from her pinnacle of pleasure, and, crouching on a low stool by her friend's side, buried her face in her lap and burst into tears, saying—

"It's too good to be true; you mustn't tease me, Ruth, by talking about such beautiful things. I have no right to drag away at your savings; I must stop at Ragington and hem skirts till I die."

Topsy, who in reality was a year older than Ruth, seemed but a tired sick child compared with her comrade, so strong and quiet; and as the classroom grew dark and the firelight died away, she listened to the low melodious tones of her friend, who gently stroked the little woman's dark hair and soothed her.

"You and I, Topsy—the inseparables as Ragington calls us—have been long enough in 'the position to which we were called,' to quote the Catechism. No one knows how I have chafed and fretted while apparently wearing my chains so

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calmly. As for you, life has been one long round of poverty, overwork, and weakness. Only your sweet bright nature has kept the smile shining through the clouds. I want to see the world while I am young enough to enjoy it; spend a fair slice of my savings, if need be, in one whole solid year, away from the tasks that are making me into a teaching machine. Where I wander, there must you go also, for I need your love, and the sight of your pleasure will repay me a thousandfold. Nay! Topsy, it's not a bit of use; you have tried sometimes to conquer my will, but have never bent it one little piece. This is my kingdom; you represent the infant subjects that acknowledge my sway, and, in a word, I command your attendance on my pilgrimage. Until last summer no chance of change appeared, but, since then, events have shaped themselves without my interference. My sister Jennie has qualified for the post of mistress of this precious school, and with the managers' consent, coupled with polite regrets, I yield up my sceptre for a year, or it may be for ever. My Uncle Jack out in the North-West Territories in Canada has many a time asked one of us girls to go out for a long visit to his farm, and as Jack was mother's only brother, she has, for a wonder, consented to my going abroad. Poor old mother, Canada, France, Australia, or Switzerland are all foreign parts to her, and equally distant and dreadful. But between you and me, Topsy, mother wants to show her brother what fine girls she has of her own, and sends me as a sample of the flock. So I wrote a couple of mails ago and accepted the invitation, but hinting broadly that my own



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special lady friend required change of air and scene, and might like to come over with me. And here's the letter, Topsy, by yesterday's post, written in a right hearty fashion, that makes me anxious to hug my dear old uncle, telling me to bring out forty young ladies if I like and he will find bachelors for every one. Then, like the princess in the fairy stories, comes my little sweet-heart free from business cares, longing for fun and wanderings over the seas and far away. So come home with me, Topsy, roost under our roof for the rest of your time in England, superintend the capes and gowns and all the rest that we shall be obliged to take, and in three ~~short~~ weeks let us pack our trunks and say good-bye to dingy old Ragington."

"I cannot thank you, Ruth, it's no good trying. You've always been the strong partner in our firm, and I can only pay you back by loving you ever such a big lot. My days have been long and weary, and keeping bright has not been easy at all. Oh ! if the grand ladies who come in carriages, who sit down by the side of the counter and keep us trotting to and fro on their paltry errands, could only feel how our backs ache sometimes. Or when for a funeral, a wedding, or grand party, they insist on piles of fine feathers being ready in next to no time, perhaps if they knew how our eyes burn and heads swim while the stitches run all together, blurred and dancing, they would be a little more merciful. But they are not really cruel, I think, only so ignorant, so terribly ignorant. One day Amy Saunders fainted while serving a nice kindly young lady, and nothing could have been sweeter than the way that good

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woman acted. And, ever since, she has been trying to learn all about us, and comes into the sewing-room many a day and spends hours working side by side with us. The dresses she used to plan for herself seem now to go on to the backs of some of our poor girls who really need them, while she is content with a quarter of the things she had before. It is only that they don't think, and when they do, their hearts are very good, I believe. But good-bye to toil ; I'll try and forgive everybody, and sing away as we work once in a while all for ourselves on our own things."

CHAPTER II

"REGINA at last. And now to make the acquaintance of Uncle Jack, or John Nettleton, Esq., Justice of the Peace, and owner of I don't know how much of this eternal prairie." And Ruth Evans jumped on the platform with a light step, and began stacking wraps and parcels around her, Topsy acting as thrower-out from the railroad car.

It is only a few weeks since our two adventuresses set sail from Liverpool, but the change and excitement have worked wonders in both of them. The formal "schoolmarm" manner has almost gone, showing the real Ruth underneath the mask of discipline and despotic authority. The old look of dissatisfaction has given place to one full of life and happiness.

Some creatures will pine in the cosiest cage, even with plenty of nuts or sugar. They require space and scope for their superfluous stock of energy, and some chance to develop their inborn characteristics. It was only another case of "some village Hampden" that Gray sings of in his immortal Elegy. Not "chill penury" in a literal sense, perhaps, but the constitutional stroll after school hours, the mental stimulus of a mothers' meeting, a dry-as-dust lecture, or a magic-lantern

show, had been starvation diet for a nature like Ruth's. For the last few weeks, however, her cup had been overflowing—she had really lived in a sense unknown before.

As for Topsy, she went through every stage from misery to bliss during the ten days' voyage. The first chapter, with seasickness *ad libitum*, made her cry for the workroom, the grave, or any place but the unruly ocean.

A glimmer of sunshine entered her soul, when pale and limp, on a deck chair, she was waited upon by three young officers and a tall man with a fierce black moustache, who all talked to the insignificant little milliner as if she were a lady of vast importance. Modest little Topsy hardly realised that with her dark curly hair blowing around her face, and those pathetic brown eyes of hers, she was just the woman to whom great strong men so often fall victims. And before the steamer reached its destination (the ~~ice~~ in the wintry St. Lawrence compelling them to stop far short of Montreal), the very marked attentions of at least one passenger, not more than ten years her junior, raised Miss Perrott to the topmost pitch of mischievous excitement.

"Only fancy, Ruth," she laughed merrily, when quite out of earshot of the love-lorn youth; "he quoted Shelley, Byron, and Southey before I could get my hand free, and would have given a verse from ever so many poets if I had given the least encouragement. He looked so solemn—I felt sure he was thinking of a suitable piece of Browning—that I had to bury my face in my handkerchief to prevent an explosion, and ran away without another word. I hope he thought

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it was grief, and not fun, for I'm very sorry for the poor boy."

"You're a terrible little coquette, Topsy," replied Ruth, with a smile of mature wisdom. "I can see my responsibility as your chaperone is no sinecure."

The contrast between the friends was very marked as they first caught a glimpse of the grand Falls of Niagara. Topsy shouted, clapped her hands, and gushed with excess of admiration for the "pretty," the "lovely," the "exquisite," the all the other adjectives of the same kind. Ruth said quietly, "Hush! hush! you can't put this into words, let us look at it and think a while."

All across Canada, through the forest district, then out on the endless prairies, the lass from the woollen district was on the *qui vive* for every novel bit of scenery—a lonely settler's clearing, a picturesque lake, or a herd of cattle with rough-riders behind. And while Topsy prattled, Ruth drank in all the grandeur and the beauty, pondering on the majesty of nature's masterpieces as they were unfolded before her, her character unconsciously growing sweeter and happier day by day.

The absent home was not rendered contemptible by all the new things and rich outlook. The old nest rather grew sweeter, as, after all, the place where "our folks" dwelt. Ruth's six-page letters by every mail breathed a spirit of true domestic affection, but it was fine to feel one's wings after hovering so long in one place.

"It mud be aar Grace ovver agean," rang out a hearty Yorkshire accent, as a broad-shouldered

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elderly gentleman farmer, in wolfskin coat and mocassins, seized Ruth by both hands and kissed her. "The sight of your rosy English face has made me a Ragington chap agmean, an' I drop into me muther tongue quite natural like."

Topsy meanwhile had loaded herself with parcels and staggered off towards the sleigh that she noticed Uncle Jack came from. Two burly porters rushed to her assistance with as much chivalry as a British guard exhibits towards a first-class generous-looking mortal. Beauty in distress was in this instance as attractive as a possible tip where that hateful and degrading system holds the field. Presently Ruth and her uncle found the little woman, with a wondrous look of busy importance, superintending the disposal of the luggage on a waggon by the sleigh.

"Why didn't you leave all that to the boys, young lady? I'm waiting to be introduced to your useful and ornamental friend, niece Ruth," said the big farmer as he watched Topsy's excessive energy with an amused smile.

"Oh! I must make myself useful; I'm Ruth's mother's help, I mean lady's companion, and this is the first time I have had a chance to earn my wages," laughed Topsy, looking up into the old gentleman's face with her brown eyes all alight with happiness.

"I guess you'll be something else than a lady's companion before long if you look as nice as you do now," said the gallant old Canadian as he shook her cordially by the hand. "Canada is a fine country, and there are plenty of fine farms, and a prime lot of farmers here already; but we haven't half enough bits of feminine sunshine like

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yourself. Talk about forty of them, Ruth; we could do with well-nigh forty thousand, up to sample, mind you, in the North-West alone."

"I don't know about myself, Mr. Nettleton, though it's ever so kind of you to say such pretty things to welcome me, but I think the Yorkshire men are simply absurd not to have married Ruth and her sisters ever so many times over."

"What widows you want to make of the lasses! You've just dined on the car, have you? Very well, then, we won't wait in Regina, but drive a stage ahead and get a cup of tea on the way. ~~We have forty miles to drive before dark; the snow is in good-going order, so jump into~~ the sleigh and tuck your toes in under the rugs. The boys will bring on the heavy boxes. Oh! I forgot my drawing-room manners, and have never introduced the young rascals, have I? Tom and Oliver, come and pay your respects to the ladies. Not such weaklings, eh! my own raising, real Canucks, six feet each in their stocking feet, and strong as bullocks, but rather lacking in French polish."

The two young Nettletons, great overgrown lads of nineteen and twenty, were certainly awkward enough, and ambled forward like a couple of heavy young cart-horses. They had put down a box weighing three hundredweight or so, and grinned rather shyly as they faced the English girls. Topsy put them at their ease in a moment by suggesting that "her box must be too heavy for them: hadn't she better help lift one end?"

"Climb up on top, Miss Topsy," laughed Tom, showing a capital double set of ivories as

he did so ; "we shan't notice the bit of extra weight."

"Cheeky boy, you might have come from Leeds to say such a thing," responded the little lady, pretending offended dignity ; "but what a shame to drive off in a carriage and pair and leave you to follow with those slow oxen !"

"We've plough, and flour, and groceries, and heaps of things to fetch ; we don't come shopping every month," chimed in Oliver ; "but you go on and see mother. She's a treat. I don't believe you turn out any better mothers even in your grand old country. We call her Queen Victoria sometimes for fun, because she's just like a picture in an old album, only there's no crown. And she's just as good, and as short, and not thin either, and I daresay they are two of the best women either side of the water."

Have you ever driven for hours on a bright clear day in mid-winter over the frozen snow in a comfortable sleigh—your feet in twenty wraps alongside a well-warmed brick, and only your eyes and nose peeping out of the great buffalo robe, with a pair of prize ponies trotting along at a good twelve miles an hour, tireless and full of spirit up to the close of the trip, with silver bells jangling on their handsome necks, and the scenery all around you new and of absorbing interest?

Ruth and Topsy nestled close together under the furs, simply beaming with delight, while their new-found uncle, as they both called him by special orders, chatted away as they bowled along. Most of the journey lay over the open prairie ; slightly undulating, like wide ocean

billows, all white and smooth-topped. Now and then they passed through a little bluff of birch or pine trees with the frost rime on their branches.

For miles the only signs of life were a herd of shaggy ponies wintering on their own hook, pawing away the snow to reach the grass beneath; with startled looks the pretty creatures would shake their manes and trot away into some sheltering bluff. Then a solitary woodman loading logs on a farm sleigh, — rather late with his task, evidently, to leave the job till mid-winter.

About half-way home they halted at a wayside inn for the most grateful meal to modern maidens, afternoon tea. This *hôtel métropole* of the wilderness had but a mud floor and a sod roof. It was low and dark, and the roughly hewn logs that formed the walls had nothing but clay daubed in the chinks to relieve the bareness of the timber; but — and this was more to the point — the fragrant leaf was genuine Chinese, the cream fresh, the bread compounded of number one hard, which the Canadian wheat-grower is so proud to harvest.

While the ponies were attended to in the stable adjoining the mansion, the hungry travellers did justice to the fare provided by their sturdy host. What can you expect in the way of domestic refinements from a mere man who is farmer, postman, hotel proprietor, and blacksmith all rolled into one? But he was tolerably clean in his methods, which is more than can be said of most bachelors who paddle their own canoes in either hemisphere, and looked ruggedly handsome as he puffed away at his meerschaum and stared

admiringly at the latest thing in women that had passed that way.

And as they drove on, Mr. Nettleton laughed with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, for three other curious masculine individuals had sauntered up to the hostelry, mysteriously attracted by the news of the interesting immigrants, and were staring in unison at the disappearing sleigh.

"There are four of the forty bachelors knocked over at first sight, young ladies; just look at them standing all in a row, like ninepins. Trot along, Sprite; homeward bound, Nimble; aren't they beauties? — the best pair of ponies in the North-West!" And the spirited little fellows fairly flew over the crisp snow, the sleigh gliding smoothly and swaying ever so slightly from side to side owing to the pace.

Overhead a swish of wings was heard, where hundreds of wild geese were flying past, soon lost in the gathering darkness.

"Bad weather coming; I feel the cold nipping more than it did an hour ago, and those birds are southward-bound to escape a coming storm," muttered Mr. Nettleton, more to himself than his companions, for he half fancied they had dropped into forty-winks during the last half-mile.

And when the drive had just proved long enough, and a flake or two of snow crept under the fur hoods, and the intense cold began to penetrate, even through all the rugs, the plucky little trotters drew up, steaming but still game, at the door of Lakeside farm.

Framed by a rustic porch, with a cloak of ermine or some royal material around her

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motherly form, stood Queen Victoria or her very image in the person of Mrs. Nettleton, who beamed most graciously on the party. "There, my dears, put your feet in the oven to warm, while I get the supper on the table ; I don't know which is my niece and which isn't, but you're both as welcome as an Indian summer."

CHAPTER III

JOHN NETTLETON had left his native land five and thirty years before, owing to the common Anglo-Saxon distaste for a stay-at-home indoor life. Tempting offers by a manufacturing cousin failed to stifle the pioneer instincts. "These great lungs of mine," he used to say, "were built for fresh air, and this bony frame needs plenty of muscle to cover it. Quill driving while perched on an office stool seems too finicky a job for a strong man, and as for bargaining, there isn't an ounce of Jew in my nature."

Now a couple of hundred pounds capital is not of much use in England for farming, unless you are content with the *mustum in parvo* style of a market gardener. In Canada many families launch out with half that amount, and, by dint of hard work and rough fare, pull through their early difficulties and weather every storm.

Nettleton's tastes being wide rather than exact, he scorned the onion-bed or greenhouse, and dreamed of the American backwoods and boundless prairies.

So one fine spring he began swinging his axe under the orders of an old-fashioned Ontario settler. Two years he studied woodcraft and rough building and fencing, adding a few pounds

to his savings, while the coveted muscles stood out in rounded knots on his arms and shoulders.

On again, hundreds of miles farther west, he marched in the van of pioneers, and joined a Canadian farmer's son on the Wheatlands of Manitoba. Winnipeg, their nearest market town, was swelling from an infant to a precocious young settlement, when, after ten years' batching with his silent chum, he grew restless at the inflow of population, and planned a further trip from civilisation. This time he was determined to take up a free holding of one hundred and sixty acres, invest his money, now more than doubled, while his experience was multiplied a thousand-fold, and wrestle single-handed with Mother Nature, far from the madding crowd.

But his schemes were interfered with by the appearance on the scene of another partner—this time of the female persuasion. The unsociable old fogey, as Nettleton was rapidly becoming, peeping into the parlour of a neighbouring farm to say good-bye, was collared, so to speak, by the plump little hands of a girl who was wielding a rolling-pin, and twisting pastry about in a most bewitching fashion. It was only a visitor from the States, come to see her Manitoba cousins for a couple of months; but the time sufficed for wooing, wedding, and all the rest of it, and the solitary settler took his next move in the direction of the setting sun in double harness.

The young couple started on their honeymoon in a bran-new waggon, with many household fixings, a tent, and food enough for a lengthy voyage. They selected a farm near the shores of Long Lake, where several belts of woodland

promised shelter and winter fuel; and the soil lay deep in the sloughs, where the Canadian looks for hay in the dry seasons. Around their tent the wolves and coyotes barked at night, and the swarms of geese and other wild fowl called across the deep waters of the lonely lake.

Gradually other old-world wanderers—Scotch, Irish, English, Germans, Swedes, and Russians—had squatted on sections in the neighbourhood; and as the Nettleton herds increased, this restless Yorkshireman was beginning to wonder if he would soon have too little elbow-room and have to trek once more. The nearest dwelling, it is true, was two miles off, and the second one at least four, so there was a vast difference between the density of the West Riding and the average of one per square mile that their postal district boasted of.

Early on the morning after their arrival, Ruth was awakened by a stir in the farmyard: the crowing of cocks and cackling of hens, the quacking of ducks, the low of cattle, and the barking of two or three excited dogs. She quickly dressed and came down to the large kitchen, living-room or winter parlour, where the great stove was already glowing from a fresh meal of chips. Hearing her uncle's voice in the yard, she donned her fur hood and a thick shawl, and stepped out into the keen frosty air. It was enough to take her breath away, the drop from 50° F. inside to ever so much below zero out of doors. So Ruth hurried across to the cattle-shed, where Farmer Nettleton was arousing all this furred and feathered excitement by sundry warm pails of meal, etc. for the general breakfast.

"A stinging wind, lassie, and the glass going down fast; we shall have more snow before night—a blizzard maybe. I wish the boys were home; our Assiniboia gales are no joke even for prairie-bred fellows like Tom and Oliver."

"What a queer house, uncle! and rather pretty too," said Ruth as she tried to keep her feet warm by stamping them on the stable floor. "It looks like the three bears in the fairy tale—the big bear, the middle-sized bear, and the wee little bear."

"The wee little house was the identical log hut mother and I started housekeeping in, twenty-three years ago. Kitchen and parlour and bedroom, we had them all in one. Now it has grown old and draughty, and the north side is buttressed by the wood pile, and the east propped up with crutches, but I wouldn't sell a log of the old place for any sum. She held the uprights while I fixed them; she kept the mud floor as smooth and clean as many a drawing-room carpet; and in that crazy little porch mother sat with Tom in her lap, the happiest little woman in Canada, watching me break up the first bit of land with the plough. Number two mansion we were very proud of when we planted it in front of number one, which became back kitchen and lumber-room. You see it is made of sawn planks, and has real window-frames and sashes. And as for the stone palace in the foreground, though I was architect, I'm not half so proud of it or so fond of it as of the two old shanties, where every board and log was laid in place with my own hands. We only finished it off last year, and were precious glad to see the masons' backs.

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But I'll tell you a secret, Ruth: mother is a very ambitious woman, and Queen Victoria, as the boys call her, desired a stone palace to cut out all the neighbours. In these outlandish parts the ladies cannot flourish costumes against one another, so they see who can afford the best sleigh or the largest house. The cosy kitchen you came to last night remains our favourite haunt, and we only use the big front room in the new house to shiver in on Sundays when church is held here—once a month if a clergyman of any kind turns up."

As he talked, the farmer was by no means idle, for he seemed to be the man-of-all-work. Chaff cutting, water carrying from an ice-hole in the lake, raking down hay for more than two score cattle, besides serving swill porridge to a dozen noisy porkers, was enough to go on with. No slow-limbed agricultural labourer trailed around Lakeside farm, for the father and sons made things hum even in the busiest seasons.

And the same un-English method ruled indoors, where Ruth, who soon ran to cover nearer the stove, found the buxom little Queen producing a royal breakfast with her own unaided hands.

There was one inmate of the Canadian home-stead whom the visitors had not yet seen; they had some hesitation in asking anything about the poor half-witted daughter Mary. Years ago Ruth had heard her mother say what a sad blow it was to their Uncle and Aunt Nettleton when the long-wished-for girl having arrived, years after the two boys, an accident during childhood in some way injured her mind. There had been no mention of her in any recent letter, but during

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the morning Ruth gently broached the subject by saying—

"Aunt Polly, will you tell me about Cousin Mary? I am especially interested in sick or afflicted children, and should like to help you."

"It's too bad of me, Ruth dear; but I always shrink from showing my poor little darling to strangers. I hide her away for days when we have visitors, for I cannot bear to watch their curiosity and pity," and the mother wiped her eyes as she worked away furiously with the rolling-pin.

— "Take me to see her, aunt. I cannot be happy in Canada if I cannot share your sorrows, as well as all the good things you seem determined to give us." And Ruth, in her quiet masterful way, put aside the paste-board and carried off the obstinate sensitive mother to visit Mary in the room upstairs.

Sitting on the floor, humming away in a low musical tone and playing with a pile of wooden bricks, was a tall fair-haired girl about fifteen years of age. There was nothing repulsive or idiotic about her, rather the innocent expression of a baby three years of age; her face lit up as the mother came in. When she saw Ruth, a shy look, such as a mere infant might give, passed like a cloud across the sunny sky, and her face was hidden in the skirt of her mother's dress.

But Ruth had not disciplined and led in the stony paths of education many hundreds of infants without learning a little of the moods and tenses of these tiny puzzling mortals. (At the beginning of a new term the Ragington matrons usually brought her thirty, or more raw undisciplined bairns,

coaxed them into the schoolroom and ran away themselves, or pushed the spoilt darlings into the doorway with many lamentations on either side. Then was in verity a howling wilderness of children, and the elementary schoolmistress and her lieutenants wrestled mightily and prevailed, until order reigned amid the sobbing chaos.)

And here, she saw at a glance, was a form of fifteen with a mind only three years old. "Arrested mental development," muttered Ruth, as a diagnosis of the case. "I have met with cases before, but not so pronounced as this; how often fond mothers and fathers say, 'Oh that our little ones would remain prattling toddlers; what a pity they grow into men and women so soon!' They would rue the day if some wizard answered their foolish wish by waving a wand over the developing child and said, 'Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther!'"

Not taking any notice apparently of the child, Ruth began building a tower on her own account with the bricks, and gradually and timidly the proprietor of these treasures became interested in the wonderful new pile. In five minutes she was quietly handing the bricks to her new clever playmate, and the two were sitting side by side as busy as could be on the bedroom floor, building walls and barns, and cow-sheds and farmhouses.

Aunt Polly left them without a word, for she was too near weeping to speak, but her new-found niece had done more to gain her love by this method of meeting the family trouble than months of ordinary intercourse. Her neighbours indiscreetly worried her by probing the wound, asking for full particulars of the accident, how

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the child, when quite young, was lost in the snow and nearly frozen, how the body went on growing while the mind remained at the same stage. And then most of them recommended some special cure, or told of similar cases they had read of in books. So when Ruth simply accepted the situation as it stood, met the innocent child where they were equals, in the world of toys, and never asked for a history of the case, Aunt Polly's heart warmed to her mightily.

The wind rose higher as the night went on, and, through minute crevices in roof and timbers, finely powdered snow was driven into the two smaller houses. It is impossible to see out of the window for several months of a Canadian winter, for a permanent coating of frost rime covers the outer and even inner panes of glass in the double sashes.

When the party gathered all together next morning in the warm kitchen, an anxious look on the farmer's face told that he was not a little troubled about the blizzard and his absent sons. After finishing the farm work outside, and trying to settle down by the stove with a book, he tossed it aside and said—

“Mother, I'm going a mile or two on the way to meet them, though as likely as not they have taken shelter somewhere on the trail. I reckoned they would be home last evening, or soon after breakfast to-day; so pack the wallet with some cold meat and tea, and a wee drop of spirits, and I'll put on the snow-shoes for a trip south.”

Ruth and Topsy went with him to the outer porch, but the howling storm and biting air drove them in shivering from the perils of the unknown.

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During a fresh fall of snow, while it lies soft and deep in drifts, it is safer and swifter travelling on snow-shoes. Without them a pedestrian may find himself buried up to his arm-pits and exhausted by plunging along as his feet sink into the loose white mass. Mr. Nettleton was an expert with the Eskimo seven-league boots, and had been on many lonely hunting excursions over the Assiniboa and Saskatchewan territories. He had faced more terrible Nor'-Westers than this one, having been even obliged to camp-out in a sleeping-bag and blankets, without a fire, but with the chance of a bear or pack of wolves for nocturnal company. On one occasion, when riding across country, he had to adopt the last resource of a storm-worn traveller. His horse had given up the struggle, and he was away from any bluff or shelter. The gale raged furiously around him, and he felt his own strength and vitality ebbing away. So he killed the poor exhausted animal, opened its warm body with his hunting-knife, and crept inside to escape the piercing air that threatened certain death. When he emerged from his ghastly shelter next morning like a dry-land Jonah, it was pleasant in one way, but rather aggravating in another, to find he had slaughtered a ninety-dollar horse and spent such an uncomfortable night within three hundred yards of his own fireside.

The farmer was soon lost to sight as he bent forward to fight his way, skimming at a wonderfully good pace across the soft snow, bundled up to the eyebrows in arctic furs, his faithful old sheep-dog in attendance.

There was no sign of life in the air or on the

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waste of drifting snow. The farm buildings, half buried, and the few scattered trees alone broke the dead level of the white landscape. The wide sloughs, or hollows where the hay was garnered only a few months before, contained a stack or two, and these were practically the only landmarks to steer by. To anyone unused to the country and not inured to the climate it would have been sheer folly to stir abroad on such an afternoon; much as Nettleton valued his boys' hardiness and Canadian-bred grit, he knew that the experience of an old pioneering hand might be needed in this emergency.

It was dreary work for the English girls waiting indoors all that day, with an unspoken dread hanging over the household. Topsy dropped her lighter vein, and tried to make Aunt Polly forget her anxieties in teaching her the thousand knowing ways of prairie housewives. In return she turned over the lady's wardrobe, dating back a score of years with very little change of fashion. With her deft little fingers she handled quaint old bonnets of prehistoric build, and, twisting up a ribbon here and hitching a corner there, brought them up to date, while the owner beamed with admiration and gratitude, and well-nigh ceased to listen for outside sounds.

Ruth had already gained Mary's confidence, and hour after hour they played together, with toys or little baby games, until sometimes the tall child laughed and crowed with delight. It was a grand discovery when, sitting at the American organ trying over quietly an old hymn tune, she found Mary humming in perfect tune to herself. So she led the child to the keyboard, and, guiding

her fingers, picked out the air several times. A glimmer of something beyond the baby grasp flitted more than once across her face,—and, who knows, thought Ruth, whether music may not be a fairy power to unlock this lost intelligence. Not to weary her, they next began making a doll's dress together—a very simple affair, but evidently a prodigious mystery to the child, who watched the cutting and stitching and fitting, as they were deliberately brought to her notice, with round eyes of wonder. Infinite patience is said to be the basis of true genius, and during that wild and stormy day, while the wind howled fiercely around the house, the leader of so many hundred dull bairns through their infant sloughs of despond concentrated all her faculties on this little spot of frozen ground.

They placed lamps in every window, and every few minutes Mrs. Nettleton opened the front door and blew a long shrill whistle and rang a loud dinner bell, lest the wanderers were near at hand without being aware of it.

And when the strain began to grow unbearable, the welcome sound of Rover's bark and a cheery hurrah! from three strong voices answered the warning bell and whistle. Soon there was stamping of feet and shaking of snow from fur coats in the outer room, and the boys and their father rushed in to smother the Queen-mother with kisses; while her royal highness, who had never shed a tear while they were in danger, broke down in most undignified fashion now that they were safe and sound.

As they finished a roast goose (the spoil of Oliver, the crack-shot of the family), they related

their adventures. Tom was for stopping at the half-way house. Oliver pooh-poohed the danger, and said Miss Topsy would never forgive them if they delayed with her frills and fixings. So in the early dawn they had plunged into the blizzard with more zeal than discretion. In two hours they were a mile off the track, and only discovered their whereabouts by the rumbling of the waggon wheels showing that they had strayed on to the frozen lake. By the time they had recovered the trail again, or where the trail used to be, one of the oxen struck work, and lay down in a sulky dead-beat style. Coaxing and goading induced the poor beast to struggle on a bit farther, and then both the animals lay down panting to think the matter over. It was nearly night-fall, and they were still miles from home. The air pierced to their very marrow through the fur clothing, and their spirits sank as low as the thermometer. But when Rover rushed up to the waggon and frisked around the party as if to tell them that assistance was coming, the boys—for after all they were but lads—hugged the shaggy creature as a real bit of home comfort out there in the dreary waste. The old prairie hand rapidly put things to rights. The boys were roused up by some refreshment eaten under the shelter of a little bluff, where they led the oxen for a breathing space. Securing the tarpaulin firmly over all the goods and chattels, they left the waggon among the birch trees, to be called for some other day; and the cattle, cheered by the master's voice and without their load behind them, plodded steadily and straight for the Lakeside stables.

A home with harmony in it is a goodly sight

anywhere, but, to pitch the scene in its homeliest guise, set the jewel in a Canadian out-settlement, with a killing blast howling and blustering all around, the roaring fire crackling in the great stove, a savoury meal on the table, some hungry men doing justice to the handiwork of the indoor comfort keepers, and, above all, the feeling that a great danger has been overcome and the dearest of household treasures are safe again.

CHAPTER IV

BIRD, the bachelor, so called to distinguish him from a more distant neighbour of the same name, with a mate and several fledglings, lived eight miles away, north-east of the lake. He left England twelve years before, with only enough money to pay his passage. Two other emigrants from the same village landed in Quebec with him, in a like impecunious condition, to carve out their fortunes from the Canadian joint.

In the old country, Bird had been severely handicapped, for the land around his home was all held by large tenant farmers, except for one bleak field of allotments, for which the poor were charged four times the rent per acre that the comparatively well-to-do cultivator paid for the same soil in a wholesale quantity. Wages stood at the princely figure of twelve shillings per week, and the long hours of the agricultural labourers left little time or energy for home gardening. Besides, the home gardens were too diminutive and their virtues too much sapped by my lord's timber trees hard by to encourage the hinds unduly.

The family mansion where the Birds had been privileged to exist on payment of one-and-sixpence per week, was a three-roomed hovel with a leaky thatched roof, rickety doors and windows, and

sanitary conditions concerning which the less said the better. Under the circumstances, it was strange how stalwart the flaxen-haired children grew up around this apology for a home. Their salvation lay in the fact that they worked or played out of doors most of the day, and the crowded bedrooms were so draughty and the walls so cracked that fresh air surreptitiously entered in and furnished the bairns with breathing material. An equally ignorant set of folks in another cottage more newly built, and air and water tight very nearly, went off one by one with consumption. They followed the insane fashion of shutting their bedroom windows at night, and the lively tubercle bacilli revelled and flourished amid the unspeakably foul air that must result in such conditions.

The owner of the great estate on which these cottage homes of England were samples, pottered away his time in London East End philanthropies. There he slumped most laboriously, and gave clerically conducted lectures to the inhabitants on sanitation, ventilation, and reforms of all sorts. Soon he expected to enter Parliament—for he was supposed to be an especial friend of the people—to join the great group of Liberal talkers who vainly tried to outchatter the ponderous Conservative talkers over the way. And all the while, under his own complete control, were twenty thousand acres of good British land, where he would have been more readily listened to than in the lost wilderness of London, and he might have drawn many family wrecks out of that undesirable maelstrom back to safety in rural homesteads. But this prosaic duty was too

quiet and obvious for the Liberal lord; perchance his name might be lost to fame amid the happy homes and hedgerows of a mere provincial village. His estate was squeezed to aid his worse than useless charities and ambitions in an over-crowded city where people were pressing in ever-increasing hordes, while down in fertile Dorsetshire the young men shook off the dust of the reformer's land from their feet as they marched away.

Bird and his two companions soon found work on the Canadian Pacific Railway. But apparently each man had brought his character across the herring-pond with him, and not even a drop of two score in temperature, or a change from West Country mildness and damp to Canadian breezes and drought, altered the effects of these persistent causes. Bird plodded on, slow and thorough, a trustworthy, big, strong fellow, rough outside, but gentle at the core. With a brain also big and slow, he gradually mastered many things, and read literature of a solidity few men care to tackle after working hard in the open air.

Morgan, another of the three, was a different type of man, clever and shrewd enough, but unable to stick long to one job or gather much moss at a time. So, in course of years, during which Bird became a substantial prairie farmer, with teams, cattle, and implements, Morgan had sampled half the cities in Canada, and finally returned to England to run down the new country as a fraud.

Fitzgerald hailed from the same village, but at the other end of the social scale. He was a born

incapable who did but little work, nor did that little well. True, it was not his own fault altogether, for he had been trained in that set where they ring for a maid-servant to put coal on the fire when several strong men are lounging around in close proximity to the coal-box. It was in reality rather cruel to send adrift on life's turbulent stream such a soft-handed fellow, trained in nothing but self-indulgence and paltry family pride. On the sturdy labourer Bird deciding to cross the ocean, they had attached their ne'er-do-well to him, with private instructions to take him away and lose him. To keep him at a distance, the great Fitzgerald snobs at home had to forward current coin of the realm at intervals; and the weak, ignorant young man—for Greek particles are not worth much out in the hurly-burly—was only kept from utter ruin by his rough neighbour, Bird, who was true to him for the sake of the old home-land.

Many thousands of these remittance-men, the curse of every colony, mouch around the cities while the cheque from the old folk lasts, then slink back to some neglected holding or New World slum until more funds can be raked up. And yet they are more sinned against than sinning, for they have been reared to be useless and helpless, and so made ten times as vulnerable to vice and folly.

True it was that Bird's farm was a pattern of cleanliness, and his cattle up to the mark; but the condition of his house on the inner side, and the disreputable state of the lonely fellow's wardrobe, were woebegone. We cannot better describe them than by peeping over Topsy's shoulder as



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she depicts it all to a fellow-milliner to whom she had promised to write.

"We came now to a real tidy farm, like the best of our Yorkshire fields, with good fences, and sheep, cattle, and ponies, looking fat and flourishing, around the farmyard and sheds. The house was the tiniest we have yet seen, only just fourteen feet square, the smallest home a settler may build to fulfil his right to the grant of land. Ruth and I were paying calls under the guidance of Cousin Tom, and issuing invitations to a social evening and dance at the Nettletons' on the following Saturday. In the doorway of this smallest house stood one of the biggest men I have yet seen in this land of lengthy lads. It was not so much his height, as the breadth of his shoulders, for they seemed literally to fill up the doorway.

"He was dreadfully shabby; an old black frock-coat of a long-forgotten style, unbrushed, buttonless, and with one tail completely gone, formed one of about three garments. The second item was a torn woollen shirt, open at the neck, although the day was so frosty. I have noticed, though, that when the wind drops we can stand the intense dry cold better than our raw foggy Leeds winters, and, when working out of doors, the men take off their coats whatever below zero the thermometer stands. Later on, when I peeped out of the cabin to watch our big settler chopping some logs to pile on the stove, I couldn't help noticing that his third garment—you know the one I mean—was secured to his braces by a wooden skewer. And yet with these things, that an English tramp would have scorned, the man

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looked so healthy and strong, and I almost think handsome, that I soon forgot all about his outfit.

"Oh! the mess and muddle in that poor man's house. I simply screamed when I saw it, and my heart was filled with a deep pity for the poor forsaken youth who did not know the value of a woman's fingers in a house. A few plates lay on the table where no table-cloth or scrubbing-brush had been for years; and, will you believe it, every plate had been used on both sides for different meals! They were all waiting for a good wash-up on Sunday, when the proprietor had time. Ruth was awfully disgusted with the place, and, holding up her skirts, said, as soon as his back was turned, 'My word, the place is lost in dirt.'

"I don't know why it was that I turned round almost fiercely and asked how the poor man was to be expected to know any better, ~~and~~ and hadn't he enough to do outside, where the farm was kept like a garden, and the cattle ever so much better managed than even Mr. Nettleton's? And when I tucked up my sleeves and rattled around the hut until every plate was clean and put tidily away, and the earth floor swept, and the bachelor's books (he had a lot of them, with heavy sentences inside about economics, and ethics, and political problems, and rubbish like that) dusted and put in proper order,—why, Ruth laughed away at me; and said I looked like the right woman in the right place. So after such insinuations as that we drove on. I feel sure Bird (isn't it rather a pretty name?) will come to the dance even if it was ninety miles, he was so pleased at the clearing-up I did for him while he was busy with the horses outside. The last we saw of him he was standing

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in the doorway gazing alternately at the disappearing sleigh and the revolutionised cabin."

Besides the visit described by Topsy, they drove round to half a dozen other homesteads, and were welcomed at every one in a way that only isolated settlers care to show. At one weird desolate building, with not a tree near it and no sign of other human habitation for miles around, they saw the jolliest little woman, not five feet high, with a bouncing boy of six months on her left arm, while she vainly tried to turn the churn regularly with the other hand. Tom undertook the churn, Topsy chummed up with the little mother, while Ruth straightway annexed the baby. It was surprising how that self-possessed party, whom one might have thought had seen enough of infants, fell captive immediately to anything under two years old. And the juvenile Canadian crowded away while she talked baby talk of the silliest description, and danced him up and down in her strong arms, saying, with a touch of her mother's vernacular, "There's nowt so sweet as a babby."

Later on their hostess sat down at her piano, and such brilliant and delightful music was drawn out by those little fingers that they had only to close their eyes to fancy themselves in a London concert-room listening to some long-named and longer-haired Polish professor. And here they were out on the distant prairie, with Indians for their nearest neighbours, and a tiny lady with her tinier baby keeping one another company while her long-limbed Scotch husband was freighting grain a score of miles away.

It had been no slight change for dainty Miss

Devonshire of the Royal College of Music, the pet of London drawing-rooms and the pride of her teachers' hearts, to throw away all her prospects of a successful career as a professional player, to leave all this behind to pioneer in the wilderness alongside an uncouth Scot without a note of music in him. But Cupid plays funny pranks, and Mrs. M'Kiltum was after all fulfilling a happier destiny, and one quite as useful, churning butter and rearing bairns, as playing on pianos to satiated audiences in the West End.

She was graciously pleased to accept the invitation to Lakeside, provided, of course, that she might bring Rienzi Lancelot with her ; and as Mrs. Nettleton was an authority on teething and other infantile tribulations, the opportunity for a consultation was too good to be lost.

They looked up Fitzgerald, the remittance-man, half hoping he would not come on the eventful occasion, and Tom looked contemptuously at the man's puffy face and his neglected holding. The degenerate son of an aristocratic family over-seas was polite enough to the ladies, but whether he was quite sober or not they could hardly say, and the house simply reeked with the odour of stale tobacco and something of a spirituous nature not usually found in a prohibition district.

CHAPTER V

THE winter light was just fading as the jingling sleigh bells announced their call at the last house on the list. It was only two miles from Lakeside farm, literally their next-door neighbour, but, being situated amid a wilderness of waters, was, except in winter, more out of the way than any other household.

A cluster of little islands at the head of the lake had been utilised by a couple of ingenious friends, and a miniature Venice had sprung up. Captain Raleigh was taken in by a specious advertisement of an improved selection, well watered and timbered, no fencing required, game and fish abundant. The homestead turned out to be mostly lake; but the gentleman was of a philosophical turn of mind, and, merely remarking that it was all the less to cultivate and not so ugly as the open prairie, set to work with a faithful old retainer to make the best of the situation.

And as the sleigh rumbled over the foot-thick ice with a sonorous roll bespeaking unknown depths below, and drew up beside Raleigh's landing-stage, Ruth exclaimed with enthusiasm, "This is the prettiest little cottage we've seen in Canada. It's like a dear old Swiss châlet, while

most of the farms are square boxes with holes in for doors and windows. What a charming view across to those other islands, with all their rustic bridges, and arches, and arbours among the fir trees! Whoever lives here is an artist."

A pathway shovelled through the snow led up between an avenue of pine trees to the porch of the wooden chalet, and outside was a grim-looking man, with square clean-shaven chin and deep sunken eyes, splitting rails for fencing. Seeing the ladies he stood upright, gave a military salute, swung round on his heels and roared out in stentorian tones—

"Company of three approaching, captain. Mr. Thomas Nettleton and two females." Then saluting again, the unpolished fence-maker lubricated his palms in the usual fashion and went on unconcernedly with his task.

Everything they saw around them was utterly un-Canadian. There was no farmyard or paddock, but the sound of multitudes of ducks, fowls, geese, turkeys, and pigeons told of feathered live-stock scattered liberally among the islands. Under the wide overhanging eaves were creeping plants and a kind of wild prairie rose that threatened in a few months simply to smother the place in blossoms. Even the outside staircase to the loft in the roof was festooned with some hardy plant that other prairie houses might adopt with advantage. (The walls of Canadian farms are generally as bare as a collier's cottage, and rustic beauty, so easily attained, is all sacrificed at present to actual needs and usefulness.)

As they stood admiring the outlook from the

shelter of the porch, the proprietor, an active light-haired man about five and thirty years of age, came hurrying across the wooden bridge that connected this island with the next. Putting down the three or four buckets that he had just emptied among the noisy poultry, and raising his cap in style, he grasped Tom's fist heartily, saying—

"Come to have a cup of tea with a lone lorn couple of mere men. I'm proud, ladies, to welcome you under the roof of Spenrus Cottage. Queer name, isn't it?—compound of two of my favourite philosophers, the great-minded Herbert Spencer and the great-hearted John Ruskin. Here's the builder of our home-made shanty Corporal Churchill, late of the Royal Engineers. Corporal, lay the table;—nay, you really must stay and rest; there is a splendid moon up in two hours; Tom is escort enough for anyone, and the folks at home will be certain that someone has kept you and cared for you on the way."

Captain Raleigh with his genial chatter made them feel at their ease at once, and joined the corporal in skirmishing round the little place until a dainty repast was laid out on a dainty cloth, and even the experienced lady housekeepers saw no room for improvement. Had Topsy desired, she would have been puzzled where to set this interior to rights. Everything was spotlessly clean and fixed up as cannily as the cabin of a man-of-war. Pots and pans, crockery and pictures, even the fire-irons, shone and sparkled in the light of a bright open grate that only differed from a true-born British fireplace by standing out more into the room.

"I've often wondered," said Tom, "how your house keeps warm with only an open fireplace, captain. Our stove barely keeps the frost out, and yet your thermometer is all right and the air much fresher than at home."

"This is how it works ; you see this handle at the side of the grate. That turns on the warm air ; just put your hand here and feel it pouring into the room, fresh and warm and sweet, as the old rhyme used to say about the morning milk. The secret is right away there behind the hottest part of the fire. An air chamber, with a pipe in direct contact with the outhouse, quietly cooks our supply of new atmosphere, instead of having it struggle in at every cranny and crevice to feed the fire. Instead of a draught along the floor to make our toes icy cold, we have this supply on tap with the chill off, and the bad air is filtered gradually off by numbers of little perforations in the chimney breast up above our heads."

While the captain had been giving his lecture on ventilation, the corporal had completed the preparations for the meal by producing a smoking dish of trout, or some kindred fish, from the regions in the background, and with old-fashioned courtly grace the captain bowed Ruth to the place of honour behind the teapot. Topsy was silently amused to find herself treated as decidedly the child of the party, and for the first time since their travels began she found that this young gentleman spoke to Ruth, looked at Ruth, and passed the coquettish little one by unnoticed.

Corporal Churchill, upright as a milestone, stood ready to wait on the others, until his

superior officer ordered him to draw up a stool to the table and be sociable. So he compromised matters by sitting about half a yard from the festive board, putting away his rations with the aid of a favourite clasp-knife instead of using the orthodox cutlery.

"Rather a contrast, my friends, this cosy party to a lively time we had in New Zealand years ago. We were gold-digging on the Campbell ~~ranges~~ up among the snow-drifts under a scrap of canvas. Not a bit of food in the larder or a match left to strike a light—four hungry men looking at one another to see which was the plumpest in case of emergencies—when in came our commissariat man with a good fat sheep. Churchill! where did you get that sheep, and why wasn't it paid for?"

"Werry sorry, captain, but the owner wasn't anywherees handy, and time was an object. The sheep was a'most done for anyhow, and quite done for between the five of us without so much as a roast, not to say mint sauce and gravy," and the grim old soldier chuckled as he thought of the looted raw mutton of long ago.

"I was nearer done for that time we were caught in the floods in Argentine, sitting up in that terrible tree,—you remember, Churchill?" said the genial captain as he crouched on the hearth toasting a slice of bread and his own pleasant face at the same time.

"Yes, that was a bit too long sentry-go, and rather aggerawatin' to see our new patent movable emigrants' house floating past with all our waluables locked up inside."

"You seem to have wandered about a bit in

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your time, to quote the old song, Captain Raleigh. Have you always been as unlucky as on those two occasions?" inquired Ruth as she attended to his cup and plate, for he seemed over-busy with his guests to attend to number one.

"Ha! ha! ha! what a time I have had, to be sure," laughed the captain. "Over the ~~seas and~~ far away; with ~~never a care~~ that went much ~~below the surface~~, and lots of fun that went down to the very depths. Always rich enough to supply my wants, because stress of weather taught me long ago to cut those wants adrift that can't be dealt with promptly. We've been in every continent and sailed on every ocean since we went into partnership,—eh, Churchill? and at last have settled down as old fogeys to ease and comfort in the wilderness."

The tea was over, and their host, beaming hospitality from every lineament of his countenance, formed a semicircle of chairs around the hearth, piled on fresh logs with plenty of knots and resin in them, and once more, by some mysterious attraction, found himself next to Madam Ruth, who was handed the best arm-chair in the centre of the group.

"Light your pipes if you want to," said Ruth. "You Canadians are always miserable without them, so don't mind us."

"Then I'm not Canadian, Miss Evans, for I hate the weed like the poison it is, and the corporal is good enough to puff away anywhere but in this sacred room."

"Captain's only fault, mum; doesn't know what's good for him; tried to train him to it in India, but 'twarn't no manner o' use. He's a

werry obstinate man when he takes a notion, though you wouldn't think it to look at him," and the old soldier smiled across at his partner as he marched out with the tray to skirmish around among the crockery in the back room.

"What a splendid notion, captain!—a man and a soldier, yet actually free from the fetters of Madam Nicotine. I certainly missed the usual stale smoky flavour in Spenus Cottage. You seem an exception to a good many rules?"

"Most erratic character you ever met, and a queerly assorted couple we two men are. I hate smoking, the corporal loves it; I shall wear myself out by consuming energy, I read or write during every vacant interval; while he snores in his arm-chair and dreams he is wrestling with Russians in the Crimea, or bayoneting babies in the Indian Mutiny."

"Never did that but once, and that was a mistake," chimed in the corporal, who heard the accusation, and appeared with a cup in one hand and a dish-cloth in the other. "I charged a nigger with the rest of the troop, and my steel went through and did for a child he was carrying in his arms out of sight. Was real sorry for it afterwards, and I stayed behind to give it Christian burial."

"Horrible! What a dreadful thing, though, to stab even a live man through! I can't think how men can do such things," and Ruth hardly cared to look at the grim old corporal, who retired after vindicating his honour.

"It is extraordinary, Miss Evans," replied the captain, more seriously. "The very men who are full of tenderness towards others in ordinary life,

and shrink from violence or murder, become mad under the lust of battle, and kill and maim with unreasoning fury. Not one in a hundred could inflict these wounds calmly and deliberately at close quarters as a surgeon does. How many, if they knew their enemy's home circle, the wife and bairns yearning for him, and the loving hearts he would break, dare raise their hand in deadly strife against him?"

Ruth was astonished at the earnest tones of the captain, and paused some time before replying.

"Then why are there always plenty to take up the soldier's trade?"

"A mixture of good and bad motives," said the captain. "Your friend" is growing sleepy, and Tom is deep in Dickens, so I will tell you what I think about these military affairs."

Topsy, in truth, had nestled up on a little stool by her friend's side, and, after so many hours in the open air, had fallen into a delicious dose. As the firelight fell on the captain's expressive face, —such an essentially happy and contented face, though firm lines here and there betokened strong character beneath the bright exterior,—Ruth found herself comparing him, to his immense advantage, with some of her merchant acquaintances of grimy old Ragington. There, "brass" had been the test of a man's standing, and the seers and prophets, saints and martyrs of this or any other age ranked low in Yorkshire eyes unless they knew how to make and keep a tight hold on the almighty dollar. On the other hand, Ruth's face was well worthy of the study Captain Raleigh had been industriously making of it since the West Riding lassie had entered his domain, and

as she had that greatest of womanly gifts, the power of sympathetic listening, he told more of his deeper thoughts than he was wont to do.

"We are all creatures of heredity and environment, and how can you expect those of a brave pugnacious race like the British, educated at schools like Eton and Harrow amid the military ideas that are blessed by theological authority, how can they become other than patriots with a soldier's instincts? I never dreamed of thinking for myself on the ethics of militarism. I had as soon questioned my own right to the comfortable pedestal of respectable ease that my father placed me upon, or doubted my right to all the luxuries that tumbled into my lap without work or worth on my part, as imagined that when the rulers gave the word, we officers and privates should not go forth to slay or be slain. I won my spurs in India, and might have gone on merrily and with a quiet conscience at the same trade, but for a deeper note that was struck in my nature, my whole mental outlook being altered when the plague broke out in our Burmese cantonment. I am a soldier no longer, Miss Evans; but I am wearying you perhaps with all this talk about myself?"

"No, Captain Raleigh, your autobiography begins to be interesting. I like people to think for themselves, and the Evans family has a little Quaker blood in its veins, some of which I have inherited, for public war seems as foolish and murderous to me as private duelling."

"Well, old Churchill, my regimental servant at that time, nursed me faithfully through a bad attack of the plague, and soon afterwards I

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returned the compliment and saved the dear fellow's life when he was going under. Many a time, as I watched beside his bed, I puzzled as to why this rough soldier, born in a slum, cradled in the gutter, schooled in the streets, had as noble instincts as myself. Why had his lot been all darkness, labour, hard fare, and a humble submission to authority? while I, who had never done one hour's useful work in my butterfly career, trod along jauntily on the shoulders of these common men.

"By the time we both came out of quarantine, our position towards one another was changed. Churchill and Raleigh were now comrades, brothers, friends, and only military etiquette kept us somewhat apart. And this artificial barrier broke down before long. Our regiment had marched away from the district, and I was left in a quiet Burmese village which the war had scarcely ruffled as it swept on its rapid path. During the long period of convalescence I struck up an acquaintance with a fine specimen of an old Buddhist gentleman, cultured, wise, and tolerant. They are a peaceful gentle race, these Burmans, and, apart from the corrupt court at Mandalay, come as near to the ideal of the golden age as any people we meet in history. None are so poor that they need be anxious about to-morrow, none so burdened by riches that they need fear their fellows. The simple wants of a temperate race are soon satisfied, and the pious wealthy man builds wayside shrines and shelters, or digs wells in a thirsty region, and soon relieves himself of unnecessary cares. Only the outcasts, the brigands, and irreligious among them opposed

the British force, for they seem to have learnt their lesson of peace and non-resistance better than the followers of our Prince of Peace. How often, as we watched the shadows lengthen across that village to the edge of the jungle, the old man and I discussed the merits of our respective creeds, our heroes, our prophets, and great ones. I found myself referring constantly to the fountain head, the Gospels themselves, to prove various points in Christianity, and it was well-nigh as great a revelation to myself as to my philosophical old friend when I found how thoroughly revolutionary is the teaching of those simple books. Brought up a Pharisee of the Pharisees, with army chaplains to do the theological part for us, I had never supposed that loving our enemies, forgiving *ad libitum*, suffering rather than cause suffering, were in reality taught, meant, and exemplified so plainly there. My venerable comrade, then, in dreamy eloquent words told the story of their great prophet Buddha. But you doubtless know the charming history, Miss Evans?"

"Yes," replied Ruth, looking up at the captain, "Arnold's 'Light of Asia' is one of my favourite poems. The way the prince left his palace and eventually found wisdom is one of the most beautiful things in literature."

"So I need not tell you how these things altered my standpoint in life. At whatever cost I must give up both the easy luxurious position that I had been brought up to believe my right, and the business of humbling our enemies that I had chosen as a profession. Churchill elected to follow my fortunes when I threw up my

commission, and for many years now we have toiled side by side, and earned our bread by real work, until my hands are as hard as his, and I can enjoy ten hours' hard swinging of axe or scythe with any born labourer."

A laugh from Tom, who was following the fortunes of Mr. Pickwick and his friends, broke up this serious gossip, and Ruth and the captain started as they found how very close together and very confidential they had become. Topsy awoke, rubbing her eyes, and declaring she had almost gone to sleep. She indignantly denied, as people so often do, that she had been snoring gently for more than an hour.

Over the frozen snow they bowled along homeward, while to the music of silver bells Ruth recalled the quiet serious voice of the ex-captain, as he specially singled her out for conversation all that delightful evening at Spenrus Cottage.

"Fine lass, captain," said Churchill as the friends returned indoors. "Don't let me be in the way if you want to settle down. I can rig out a shanty on the mainland and keep a respectful distance."

"You are too blunt, and too much in a hurry, corporal. I am not a marrying man, as you very well know," replied Raleigh, almost indignantly.

"Not so far, you haven't been; and it ain't a thing as you gets in a habit of. Most folks only go through the mill once, but, bless you, I knows the symptoms of it. You had 'em all badly to-night. I was took that way once myself with a widow, and a precious narrow escape I had, for she married twice more after that," mused the old campaigner.

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"Well, well, it may be fate, corporal, and if it is I shan't grumble, for it couldn't well have met me in a fairer guise. But, dear me, what an egotistical fellow she must have thought me, for, now I come to consider, I did nothing but talk about myself and my notions. However, the dance comes next Saturday, and I didn't forget to claim the first on the list, and I must give Miss Evans a chance to tell of her affairs."

CHAPTER VI

NEVER were the Lakeside yard and stables so congested as on the great Saturday dance. Five and forty folks of all ages and conditions, in all manner of sleighs or on pony back, came in from all parts of the compass. Some came ten miles, and thought no more of it than would Britishers of visiting two miles away. Mr. Nettleton and his boys were as busy among the transport arrangements as Mother Nettleton and her two nieces in the commissariat. Even the child Mary, usually hidden away on such occasions, tried to understand the exciting preparations, though when the people began to arrive she timidly clung to Ruth's hand, and evidently wavered between the desire to run away upstairs and the desire to stay with her strong kind cousin and be brave.

The women were in a hopeless minority, but all the more important on that account. The unattached lasses were exactly represented by the Lakesiders only. There was literally not another marriageable maiden in the company, and Ruth and Topsy laughed as they remembered Yorkshire social evenings, where the fair sex were three to one at the very least.

Of course some matrons brought their babies, and my lord the infant was discussed, and wise

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advice given and taken by the Canadian cradle-rockers. Doctors are so very distant, and necessarily such very expensive luxuries, that the ladies of the prairie become independent of them, and mutually helpful in many of those mysteries that enshroud the dawn of each tiny human life.

The bachelors were besieging the unencumbered ladies and booking waltzes and polkas far ahead.

The elderly farmers, returned from comparing notes on horses, cattle, and swine; smoked and chatted on politics. Instead of the merits of a Gladstone or Disraeli, these citizens of the West directed their practical minds to the solution of questions of customs or import duties on machinery and binder twine. The relative merits of different cream separators agitated one group, while another set waxed warm over the Russian immigrants that had lately taken up several townships further north. The prevailing opinion was that these foreigners were dirty and barbarous in their habits, but, before the verdict of utter condemnation had been passed, Captain Raleigh joined in the discussion.

"Do you mean the Doukobors, the newcomers that our Government and the American Quakers are helping to make a fair start?"

"Yes, captain, we do mean them," replied a dogmatic young storekeeper; "and what I say is, that this colony has enough Swedes and Germans and Russians already, and these fellows gave their own Government trouble enough, so 'tis said."

"I know these men well, my friends," quietly responded the captain. "Some years ago I made a special journey to Russia to learn more

of this sect of Doukobors. They are clean, honest, and sober. They are the finest specimens of real peasantry in Europe, and are only leaving Russia to escape cruel persecution."

"Oh! how's that, captain? Well, to be sure, better hear all sides before saying too much is a good motto—eh, Jenkins?" and an older neighbour grinned as he nudged the assertive storekeeper in the ribs.

"Well, isn't it true they refused to fight for their country? What sort of patriots do you call men who would do that?" demanded Jenkins.

"The best type of patriots," stoutly asserted Raleigh. "These men rule their lives by an old-fashioned gospel of goodwill, and not even the Czar and all his hosts can make them learn the way to kill their fellows. You Canadians may learn a lot of Christianity from these simple true-hearted workmen, and the Russians may be said to have sent them across the water as missionaries to teach the heathen settlers. There is a patriotism that loves our own people and dislikes foreigners, and another sort that loves all men. These Doukobors are so staunch in their refusal to worship as ordered by the orthodox Church, or to take up arms and serve in the very ranks the British Empire is always preparing to face, that American descendants of old Puritan stock ought to back them up handsomely."

This was a hit against young Jenkins, who was rather proud of tracing his ancestry to the *Mayflower* pilgrim father, one Giles Jenkins, who escaped from an English prison, where he had suffered for refusing State worship and service, centuries ago.

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With a good-tempered laugh the group broke up and turned to listen to a white-haired patriarch settler who was giving a graphic account of adventures among the wolves of Southern Canada many years before. The pretty, childish Mary had been drawn into the circle by the voice of the old man, and, placing her hand in his rough horny palm, watched the wrinkled face with an expression of wonder and deep attention. Everyone had heard the child's history, but few had seen her before or understood the facts properly, but in this mixed assembly of all sorts and conditions of men all had sufficient innate chivalry to be tender and gentle towards the blighted flower of the family.

The band consisted of the Rev. Cornelius Sharpe with his ubiquitous fiddle, rarely missing on festive occasions within possible reach, and a doubtful flute, played by a shy young giant of twenty-five, burly and strong in person, but weak and erratic on the top notes. But later in the evening, when Rienzi Lancelot had been put to rest in a drawer of fine linen, the little musician of the prairies opened fire on the American organ. Under her fairy touch the sombre hymn-like notes seemed gay and sparkling, and fiddle and flute, for lack of lady partners, footed the floor together.

The Rev. Cornelius was the quaintest little oddity of a man, but well beloved by all under his ministry. It was customary to hold services at different farmhouses best suited for the purpose, and the clergy who attended were Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, or Baptist, just as the supply permitted. So the few remaining embers of old-world caste, that the rough-and-tumble

struggle with nature had left among the children of the wilderness, was driven to the winds by the variegated style of their religious teaching. When, therefore, a Quaker lady, with a concern to visit distant settlements, was announced as the next minister, the farmers and their wives rolled up in goodly numbers. Despite the female persuasion of the placid-faced lady in the fast-disappearing Society bonnet and dove-coloured silk gown, they all with one accord gave the palm for preaching to Anna Maria Hutchinson of Philadelphia.

The Rev. Cornelius, of dour Presbyterian stock, belied his ancestry in all directions. None so fond as he of a harmless frolic, concert, or family dance. He never preached more than twenty minutes, believing, like Ruskin, that a good minister needs no church or pulpit to do his best teaching. Many a silent sermon did the little Scotchman preach by the sick-bedside, and his very presence raised the tone of any assembly. He spent his sixpences in such reckless fashion that his own table was scantily supplied, but such a welcome guest at every fireside in Assiniboia need only poke his pawky visage in at the doorway to be hailed with delight. Like his fiddle under his arm he could tune his mood to grief or gladness, and could make a place of worship of the most unlikely haunts.

"Tune up, orchestra," sang out the noisiest bachelor in the crowd, who, with a rosette in his coat, posed as Master of the Ceremonies, and Farmer Nettleton and a stately dame of aristocratic lineage (who didn't forget to let her neighbours know it) sailed sedately down the room between closely packed rows of smiling faces. Topsy,

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wild with excitement, had promised already fifty dances, utterly regardless of honesty, and her little foot beat time impatiently on the floor. Mr. Bird, slow but sure, had secured the first polka ; he stooped down to clasp her waist with his huge hand and arm, and whirled her away with more force than elegance.

Ruth had refused many aspirants for the opening turn, and the mystery was explained as Captain Raleigh, arriving just in time, joined the fast-thickening dance with his handsome partner, Grand madam schoolmistress, blushing up to her eyebrows with exercise or pleasure, or whatnot, danced, as she did most other things, well, and the good-looking captain had not forgotten the experience of ballrooms in the days when he had been known as a first-rate dancing man. Few of the company wasted their time in admiring other people, being far too busy on their own account steering in among the thronging couples, but old Churchill rubbed his shaven chin thoughtfully as he muttered to himself, "He's got 'em all again, I knows the symptoms ; my shanty won't be long afore it's wanted. I'm glad as how she's a right sort, not too finicky for a worker's mate, and yet as fit for an officer's lady as any wench from Winnipeg to Calcutta."

The elasticity of a settler's house on such occasions, or during thrashing-time, when twenty men will camp on the kitchen floor, is a puzzle to Britishers. But the Lakeside three-decker was immense compared to many homesteads. And as the evening wore on, other attractions scattered the company all over the house. Supper was a standing affair literally, folks coming in by instal-

ments throughout the whole time, and returning for encores with the ferocity of prairie appetites. A few elderly quiet people settled down in the snug harness-room to whist and eucrè, cribbage or nap. And still the all-important babies held a courtly reception in the bedroom above. It was marvellous how, when any small creation lifted up its voice and wept, some mother would recognise the tune in a moment, leave her astonished partner in the midst of the maziest waltz, and trek for the staircase without hesitation.

Midnight found the party in full swing, but, someone suddenly remembering that it was Sunday morning (not the Rev. Cornelius, by the bye), a halt was called. Several stayed the night to attend service to be held next or really the same morn~~ning~~; and near neighbours, such as Captain Raleigh and his ~~military friend~~, trotted off to reappear in a few hours' time.

There were tired faces at the morning meal, but Parson Sharpe was mercifully brief in his exhortations, and one by one the sleighs and ponies disappeared with their various owners, north, south, east, and west, into the wide waste of wintry snow.

CHAPTER VII

LAKESIDE homestead had resumed its wonted quiet now that the rush of visitors was over.

All had gone but one slow-limbed slow-witted visitor, the Dorsetshire man called Bird. Mother Nettleton was vastly annoyed at the way he stuck by the stove side, all his manners run to seed, and the family dinner overdue, as he might very well see. Strangely enough, it was Mr. Nettleton who first diagnosed the poor fellow's disease ; he cordially enough invited him to join them at yet another meal. When he saw his wife's look of surprise, and when she followed him out to the wood-shed to give him a piece of her mind, he laughed heartily as he put his arm around her buxom waist.

"He's only courting, lassie. Don't you remember the way I used to forget to say good-bye and outstay my welcome at your cousin's place in Manitoba ?" and the old settler kissed his comely wife.

"Courting our Ruth ? she won't have him ! it's like his impudence—a great rough chap !" exclaimed the matron.

"Where in the world have your eyes been, mother ?" laughed Nettleton. "He never looks at Ruth while the little lass is by ; and, for all his

roughness, he's a steady, honest, ay, and a clever man too. Topsy is just the girl to twist a fourteen-stone farmer like Bird round her fingers, and, upon my word, I half believe she enjoys doing it already."

And when they returned to the living-room and saw how Bird was clumsily assisting Miss Perrott to lay the table-cloth, which required more fixing and straightening and consultation than average table-cloths, the old couple smiled into one another's eyes in appreciation of the young ones' folly.

But the victory was not so easy, after all. Every day after this, two or three young or even middle-aged men made some paltry excuse to call at Lakeside. One had a sample of winter onions to offer on the shrine of Venus, and, with his fragrant gifts in symmetrical strings at either end of a pole, knocked timidly at the house door. Another remembered that the Nettleton hens were remiss in their duties just now, and sailed along with a basket of eggs. As Mr. Nettleton said, they buzzed around the place like flies in summer-time.

In the *Lady of Lyons* we read, "Every girl knows how to accept an offer; it requires a vast deal more address to refuse one with proper condescension and disdain." And as Topsy hadn't an ounce of disdain in her nature, and enjoyed this competition immensely, she managed for a time to give neither a decided rebuff nor a too distinct encouragement to anyone. And all the time she plagued Ruth by consulting her on each embarrassing situation. How serious and sagacious the bright-eyed little maiden looked as

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she told of her admirers ; and how wise and scholastic Ruth began to look as she lectured her on the heartless flirtations she was carrying on; until Topsy suddenly executed some flank movement, such as inquiring when Captain Raleigh meant to take Miss Evans for another sleigh ride.

"I can't help being happy," mused Topsy to her friend, after one of these interesting days ; "they all say I look nice, and I really begin to think my looks have improved a bit ; haven't they, Ruth ? Then I really do pity them ~~all~~ so much, poor lonely helpless men, that it seems quite cruel sending them away to their prairie cabins. And over in England there are tens of thousands of nice girls pining away without half a sweetheart apiece. Oh ! how sorry I am for all of them ; isn't it dreadful not to be cared about by anyone special ? "

The crisis arrived in dramatic fashion one evening before the visit had lasted two months. Seven love-smitten swains happening to feel drawn by the little magnet to Lakeside on the same evening, the atmosphere in the farmhouse became absolutely explosive. For a few minutes the seven chanced to be left alone in the parlour, and as everybody's errand was well known to everyone else, it was suggested by an impulsive youth that Miss Topsy must be brought to book and select someone forthwith. "For," said this desperate candidate for matrimonial honours, "neither work nor play is the least good in the settlement while we are all at daggers drawn over one little woman. Let us go in a body and demand an immediate, surrender." The

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idea took hold of them, and they were laughing fairly sociably, among themselves when just at that moment Topsy herself walked in. She was looking so bonnie and bright that suddenly each man awkwardly ceased laughing and glared at his neighbour, for the possible loss of so much home comfort was a serious matter.

"What were you all laughing about just before I came in?" inquired Topsy, glancing from one to another of the guilty ones.

"Well, you see, Miss Perrott, it's this way," began the impulsive one, with far less assurance than before: "we, I mean I, was a-saying as there must be an end put to it soon, or some of us would go out of our minds, and then"—

"Whatever is the matter! Are you ill? or has something dreadful happened?" and Topsy edged towards the door in real or pretended consternation.

"Take a chair, miss," replied the spokesman, handing her a throne in the centre of her circle of subjects, and, summoning up courage, he plunged without further ado into his speech.

"The truth is, Miss Perrott, as you very well know,—though you do try to make it appear like as it comes in the ordinary way, so to speak,—that seven settlers doesn't come calling at a farm in the middle of the week, when there's lots of work to be done, without an object. You be the object; maybe that doesn't sound respectful like, but what I mean is this, that you've got to choose one of us and send the rest about their business. If you don't put us out of our misery, there'll be suicide or murder or something serious round

about, for we're all as much in love with you as we can be. Now, why didn't you fellows help me out with it?" and the embarrassed swain, with the perspiration standing out on his manly brow, turned savagely on his friends, who had silently and open-mouthed listened to his harangue.

"Very well put, Jonathan," growled a substantial farmer with grey hairs already appearing in his side whiskers. "You young 'uns ought to be handicapped in a race of this sort. All as I got to add to my eloquent friend's words, miss, is that if you don't approve of any of this little lot you says so straight. Ah! deary me, why haven't you got half a dozen sisters exactly like yourself, and we'd soon sort ourselves without worrying a bit?"

Topsy blushed furiously as the men fixed their love-lorn eyes upon her, and at first stamped her little foot with anger at being cornered in this outrageous way. Catching the sound of a well-known voice, she paused. The owner of the voice was asking Mr. Nettleton if they had many geese in the larder, as, having shot a couple this morning, he had taken the liberty of bringing them over.

"I don't know about the larder," laughed the old farmer, "but there are seven of 'em in the parlour."

"I'll come back in a minute or two and give you my answer," said Topsy merrily as she pushed aside the man nearest the door and darted out, nearly tumbling into the arms of Bird, the bachelor, as he stood in the passage with the geese dangling over his shoulder.

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Now, the new arrival had vainly endeavoured to obtain a definite answer to a definite question the previous evening, and had plodded the eight miles over the snow again to try another throw with fate. Topsy might have been as tantalising as ever, though her mind had been made up weeks before, had she not been attacked so vigorously by such overwhelming forces. Hemmed in here, cut off there, she had no resource but unconditional surrender, and the voice of the broad-backed rescuing party had made her heart jump in that direction. Two minutes out in the passage enabled the reply to be given in sufficiently definite form to justify the man from Dorset in heartily sealing and re-sealing the bargain.

"What's that?" queried the miserable wretch just inside the parlour door, as these aggravatingly distinct sounds of osculation proceeded from outside.

Topsy led her burly victim forward, pushed him inside, and said, "There, gentlemen, this young man will tell you my answer; and thank you all very much, and I'm very busy, so good-bye, and do be good boys, I mean men, some of you that is, and be peaceable and go home quietly." And the cruel little mortal positively hummed a tune as she watched through the blind the forlorn procession pass out into the cold towards their lonely desolate shanties. Number eight, the lucky man, stayed behind to help in the house-work; and Farmer Nettleton, strolling in from his fields an hour later, saw two people, one large and the other small, sharing an ordinary arm-chair in such



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a way that he chuckled away to himself as he said—

“ That's all right ; the little maid has picked the best of the crew, and millinery won't stand much chance now.”

CHAPTER VIII

If spring is welcome in England after rarely more than a few weeks' frost, a few dark mornings, and a good many dismal damp days, how must it be in the frozen land of Canada. Four or five months without a break in the ice-bound world of snow. The patient cattle in their dark stables, standing sometimes with icicles on their noses, seemed to smell the approach of the open season, and answered one another from shed to shed. Like magic the white mantle vanished from mother earth, and a million prairie flowers burst into bloom amid the carpet of green that so suddenly appeared to clothe the country-side. Windows were again useful to look out of as the frost rime trickled away; and the farmers, sick and tired of stove side, study, tobacco smoke, and general indoor idleness, threw off their coats and pitched into work with a will.

There had been no time wasted after Topsy made her choice. Bird made one trip to town with a load of wheat, and his waggon groaned on the return journey under a motley assortment of household goods, timber, and fine linen. One week sufficed to run up a second room to the tiny hut, the ex-milliner superintended all the

arrangements, and, with the aid of Parson Sharpe, entered upon her duties as Mrs. Bird with a despatch that would take away the breath of deliberate English maidens. But Topsy had left behind her the slow old ways of smoky Leeds ; it was so distressing every time she saw her good man and his hopeless environment that she determined to set about the cure of all his domestic disorder forthwith.

"What's the use of waiting until the busy time begins, and who is there to wait for anyhow?" said Topsy to her sedate friend Ruth, when teased about this desperate hurry. "Poor old man, he'll never be able to manage that great place, two rooms fourteen feet square each of them, without me. See how badly he managed with one room ; and, besides, I'm going to take care of all that nice crockery and those lovely curtains and things he got in Regina."

So, three months from the day of landing, Miss Perrott became Mrs. Bird, and began to manage the home department as only a Yorkshire woman can, when gentle spring sent her stalwart farmer out into the ploughed land, whistling and happy as no emperor ever could be. It was a sight to see the solid yeoman wave his hand over and over again to the little cheery figure in the porch,—for Topsy had insisted on a porch,—and even the heavy limbed horses, released from their winter stables, seemed to enter into their season's work more joyously than in the lonely days that were past.

Ruth had persevered with her pupil Mary, and the frozen mind seemed with the rest of creation to thaw out as spring began. The months of

endless patience and love were telling, and the shrinking spirit was never driven back into its shell by a hasty word. Besides the mental training, Ruth followed a strict course of physical and hygienic treatment. Because of her exceeding delicateness, Mrs. Nettleton had imagined that to guard her against chills and draughts Mary's room must be very cosy, the result being that it was also very close and stuffy.

Ruth, with her wholesome love of fresh air, so contrived that even in the Canadian winter the child slept in an open-windowed room. If the hunter can live and thrive in his sleeping-bag out under the stars with King Frost supreme around him, a child with its quick circulation and a liberal allowance of flannel underclothing and blankets will flourish in a bedroom, over the warm sitting-room, with sweet night air flowing in at the top of a distant sash. Only during an ~~actual~~ blizzard was that window quite closed, and more than once a patch of snow under the opening was quietly cleared up by Ruth before the anxious mother came upon the scene. Children are poisoned more quickly than adults by carbonic acid gas, and require plenty of oxygen to keep their young pulses going merrily; and it is no stretch of imagination to say that all the greater tragedies—battle, pestilence, and famine—kill fewer little mortals than the close atmosphere of the millions of boxed-up bedrooms.

Then the schoolmistress, who was one of nature's doctors, of the common-sense sort, daily rubbed with her firm soft hand the spine and its branching nerves, thus stimulating the

sluggish channels so intimately connected with the sluggish brain. One result of this special attention was that Mary gained energy enough to want to run about, skip and play actively, instead of moping and reclining as a chronic invalid.

Just as Ruth had deposed the mother from the post of first favourite, she had in her turn to give way to an even greater attraction. This was no other than the grim old corporal, Churchill, and, as the warm spring days enabled everyone to be out of doors, Mary used to go half-way to meet the old soldier, who, with his hand shading his eyes, might be on the lookout towards Lakeside for his young playmate. It was so much more interesting among those pretty islands, where pigeons came and fed out of her hands, where swarms of noisy ducks trooped after them as they paddled about in the boat, and Churchill was so clever at making hen-coops and boxes and baskets, that mere cattle, corn, and horses became very stupid. This strange friendship had the indirect effect of drawing Ruth more frequently to the island home than might otherwise have been the case, for the teacher was obliged to seek her truant pupil; it was always in that direction she was found. And Captain Raleigh felt obliged in common politeness to return these calls, so that Ruth missed her old companion Topsy less than might have been expected.

One bright sunny morning in May, when all the house-work had been finished (and, where there are men coming in and out from farm-work, that is no sinecure), Ruth stood at the front door, from which a distant peep of the end chimney of

Spenus Cottage could be seen through the birch trees. The bread was all baked and the dinner sufficiently prepared to require little more work on the part of Mother Nettleton. A roguish young pony, called Sprite, had been set apart for the special use of Miss Evans, and Cousin Oliver had broken it in and trained it as a most reliable lady's mount. The pretty creature at that very moment came trotting through the yard gate, left open by some chance, and, tossing his mane about, came up to his mistress at the door and demanded sugar. He got more than he bargained for, a saddle and bridle being insinuated into place while he munched his sweet morsels, and in a very few minutes Ruth was galloping over the prairie, with the pins tumbling out of her back hair as it fell over her shoulders in a heavy dark cloud. The breeze was warm, but bracing as wine, and, oh, how far away seemed grimy Ragington and its shoddy mills, out here in the free wild west! "But gently, Sprite, that gopher hole was a bad one. We were nearly over, both of us, that time. Off we go again, then, five minutes more, as hard as you can tear. Wouldn't mother stare if she saw me? she'd think I was a wild thing."

Through, tangled copsewood the adventurous rider next trotted, past sloughs encircled with a great belt of rushes, with uplifted torches of velvety brown. Now and then a meadow, girt about with a circle of low-growing wolf willows, made a wonderful study in tender greens, and it was hard to realise that this was all wild nature's garden, so grand was the effect of the massing colours of a thousand prairie flowers and shrubs.

It must have been past noon when Ruth was confronted by a decidedly awkward piece of ground, where a bog or coulee joined an offshoot of a little river that lost itself in the lake miles away. Here the difficulties of the path, and the reminder given by a keen appetite that dinner was nearly due, would have induced the rider to turn round and canter steadily homeward, had not a strange sound made her halt: many voices, joining in a monotonous kind of chant, arose over the brow of a slight eminence in front.

Ruth had already become accustomed to the almost unbroken silence of the prairies, where you may journey for days without hearing a single human voice. It was weird and startling to have this lonely scene invaded by some choir of unknown beings, and it was with a little nervous curiosity that she led Sprite up the opposite slope. And what a sight rewarded her! A team of forty women had yoked themselves to a cumbrous, old-fashioned wooden plough, and as they strained at the ropes, drawing it through the stubborn soil, they cheered one another on with some song of the plough in an unknown tongue. With gay kerchiefs on their heads and short bright-coloured petticoats these bronzed and hardy daughters of the soil tramped steadily, as any four-horse team, across the rich meadow land. For a moment Ruth was fairly puzzled as to what this picture, taken as it were out of an old Eastern story-book, might mean, but the few words she had overheard during the dance evening, when the farmers were talking about the foreign colony of

Doukobors, flashed across her mind. These sturdy pioneers, then, were the persecuted Russian peasants; the brave Christian martyrs, driven far across land and ocean among an alien people because they would obey God rather than man. And beyond the meadows tiny clouds of blue smoke rose from many little houses nestled in a sweet valley, where the same stream she had crossed wound in and out.

When the forty ploughwomen came to the end of their furrow, they caught sight of Ruth standing by her pony's side; two of the number came forward, gravely bowing, and by signs welcoming the stranger among them. The Russians tried a sentence in their own tongue, and as Ruth smiled and shook her head they also smiled and said, "English speak no." But there was the universal language of signs to fall back upon; an invitation to join the party at their midday meal was given and graciously accepted. It was well that Ruth had a genuine appetite, for the fare, a kind of thin vegetable soup and some very coarse dark bread, was not particularly tempting. Seeing that it was the best and only thing to be had, and Ruth, after her long ride, being in excellent condition for workers' rations, she did real justice to the hospitable Russians' dish.

Presently a few children joined the group, under a large tree; the food had been carried from a house near by, so that the fresh open spring air might be enjoyed. One of the little fellows, in his quaint peasant smock, the most advanced scholar present, aired his broken English with much pride. Under his escort Ruth went the round of the newly built village, and

greatly admired the way in which every material, provided by nature close by, had been cleverly used by these poor immigrants. The walls were of clay, knit together with chopped prairie grass and rushes, the roof of birch poles overlaid with turf, and the doors constructed of hewn slabs of weather board. Windows were absent, as glass meant cash, all the other things being only labour; but every family had a decent hut with the great Russian clay oven and wide sleeping shelves just as in the far-away Caucasus. There seemed to be several sick people, worn out with the hardships of the old days when priest and ruler drove them from place to place, the terrors of the long voyage, and this bitter first winter in Canada. Only one man was to be seen, a patriarch of over ninety, with snowy white hair covered with a fur cap, and a white curling beard falling over his breast. He was evidently a man of great importance in the community; and when the little scholar had brought Ruth to this old man's residence he walked sedately away, leaving the honoured guest with their most honoured member. Fortunately for their further acquaintance, this veteran had a slight knowledge of English, and as he rose from his seat and bowed gravely he said, "Blessed be thou, my daughter; God is with us to-day." How like Holman Hunt's picture of the presentation of Christ in the temple was the aged peasant in his curious smock of blue material; he required little encouragement to tell his young visitor of some of their experiences in the old world and the new.

His words were slow and his language a little laboured as he strove in the foreign tongue to

speak his thoughts, but briefly his narrative was as follows :—Most of his people, the Doukoborts, came from the southern part of Transcaucasia, bordering on the Black Sea. For a hundred and fifty years the Russian Government and the Greek Church had persecuted this little sect of a few thousand souls—sometimes driven among the mountains, where it was hoped wild lawless tribes would have helped in their extermination, but where God or their own loving-kindness had raised them up friends among the heathen. Many sorrows and many calamities had they seen, yet they would not bear arms, and never had God forsaken them. “Our brothers and sons are even now away in Siberia, but for a few that are to-day earning money on your railways so that we ~~may~~ bear our own burdens in your goodly land among these dearly loved English people. Sometimes we enjoyed rest and prosperity, for even officials are better than their laws at times, but at last the great Czar allowed the remnant of our people to leave the land of our fathers, the warm shores of the sea that was home to all of us, and the ‘friends’ of England and America helped to start our communities afresh in this cold but free land of Canada.”

Much more than all this Ruth learnt during that spring afternoon from the venerable man, as through the open door they watched the brave women marching steadily to and fro at their heavy task and singing psalms and hymns to cheer one another on.

Past the door came all the village children,—not many, alas, for child-life had been too frail often to live amid such perils as had been gone

through, — trooping eagerly towards someone approaching from across the stream. Who could this man on horseback be, so popular with the young people? Ruth called to her friend, the little scholar, to ask what all the excitement was about.

“Schoolmaster him teach talk English,” replied the youngster breathlessly as he ran after his fellows.

The rider dismounted some fifty yards away, and formed his eager learners into a circle on the grass around him.

Ruth soon recognised the clear voice of Captain Raleigh, and, without showing herself, this expert in scholastic lore watched the amateur wrestling with his difficulties. The children knew but few words of his language, while he knew still fewer of Russian. At last, when he bungled dreadfully over the best way of teaching the children how to count in English, her patience knew no bounds, and stepping across from the old man’s hut she said laughingly to the captain —

“Why not try a kindergarten method? You will never get on in that fashion. Where did you learn to teach children in that way? — it would be almost as easy for them to start with geometry and Euclid straight away.”

“I resign my post with pleasure,” replied the captain as he stood aside and let his fair friend into the centre of the group, and in his turn watched how a real teacher set about it.

Ruth began by holding up one finger, saying deliberately “one.” Then two fingers “two.” Three fingers “three.” Not a glimmer of understanding among the little ones. The same

process repeated, and this time her bright boy friend realised that counting was the order of the day and chattered away to his comrades, telling them of his discovery. In a very few minutes the Russians knew how to count up to twenty in English, and Ruth had learnt the equivalent in the Russian.

"That's enough for a beginning, and I must really hasten home. I never meant to ride so far, and only discovered this interesting place by chance," and Ruth unhitched her pony from a tree close by, and shook hands with the patriarch; he had joined the children, and stood, staff in hand, the sunshine lighting up a thousand fine wrinkles in his expressive face.

"And this is my regular monthly visit to my old friends from Russia. No wonder I stuck up for them when the farmers and storekeepers talked about them being no use to this country. Did you ever see such physique in women? And is it not plucky of them to do what they can even without horses or oxen, instead of sitting still and bewailing their fate? The men are doing *their* part, and the women mean to show something accomplished at home when they return before the winter with a little ready money. How glad I was to see you when I was plunging away with my clumsy method of teaching.—Good-bye, everyone. This is our way home," and away rode the English lass and her bright handsome cavalier, while all the commune ceased its labours and waved a cheery adieu ere they disappeared over the crest of the hill.

CHAPTER IX

THERE was a lull in the midsummer farming operations across the hot and glaring plains of Assiniboia. The whirr of the busy mowing machines was still in the wide sloughs on Lakeside farm, and wherever within miles around the moisture in the hollows promised a crop of long grass. One or two days out in the blazing sun, and the hay was sufficiently dry to stack, and dotted haphazard over the prairie were hay-ricks of all sizes, to be left until called for. The wheat was heading up well, but required a week or two before it was fully ripe ; and the reaper and binder in its coat of gaudy scarlet paint was in working order to the last bolt, ready to replace its mowing companion behind the dappled greys or chestnut team.

Ruth was loitering over dinner alone, in the large room at Lakeside, for the stone building was comparatively cool during these hot July afternoons. The buzz of ten thousand flies filled the air, with a dull hum ; often every picture-frame, the dinner-table, the loaf, butter, and dishes were black with these intolerable pests. All the Nettleton family, except Mary, were away for the day visiting some old friends fifteen miles away. Mary, as she so often had done of late,

was assisting Corporal Churchill among his flocks of fancy fowls. She was slow in learning her book lessons, but picked up with wonderful eagerness a practical knowledge of the points of Minorcas, Plymouth Rocks, Brahma, or Leghorn fowls. A particular pen of game bantams were her own property, and roamed about freely on a tiny island forty yards square. The consultations with her elderly adviser, the building of their wooden palace, and the visit by boat to attend to her treasures involved a daily trip, and Mary grew stronger in body as her mind was aroused by such keen interests.

So Ruth, half dozing over her meal and a story-book, sat in a low comfortable chair in the shady parlour, little dreaming of the danger that threatened the homestead where so many happy months had passed. She did not hear the crackle of the deadly prairie fire as it swept onward towards the ploughed belt of open ground, which alone protected the whole place. She was aroused from a pleasant reverie, in which hovered to and fro the figure of a certain gentleman named Raleigh, and the lids were dropping over her eyes preparatory to a siesta of full forty winks, when a startled neigh from her pony Sprite, which galloped furiously past the window, fairly aroused the sleeping beauty.

A strong smell of burning filled the air; a wind seemed to have arisen like magic, and clouds of dense smoke blew towards the house. One glance beyond the farmyard towards the wheat-fields, ripening to harvest, showed the startled English girl that the most dreaded visitor in all Canada was paying her a call that afternoon. She

was no coward, but to be alone, without any experience, to face that bank of moving fire which every second crept closer to the household treasures,—this at first seemed to paralyse every nerve. It was but for half a minute ; through her memory passed in an instant tales that her uncle had told of day-long fights, with branches and sticks, more than once, against this awful foe. Fortunately her dress was a light woollen garment and her boots were strong, so, merely snatching a boy's cap and a pair of thick hedging gloves, she rushed out into the garden and tore a strong branch of brushwood from the faggot pile as she hurried on.

Frightened droves of cattle and a scattered crowd of sheep were already closing in on the farmstead, and it required some pluck to pass these animals and get nearer to the smoke-cloud before her. A hundred acres of wheat and many a wide breadth of oats lay a little to the right side of the buildings, and a dark brown strip of ploughed land lay like a narrow barrier between the valuables and the fast-approaching flames. Oh, how narrow the space seemed ! would that Tom had added more furrows to that little strip of unplanted soil, for the wind seemed to grow fiercer, and already bright sparks were falling on the open soil as Ruth, pale and breathless, arrived at the post of danger. She had little time to pause, for first on one hand, and then on the other, patches of prairie grass, dry as tinder from the fierce sunshine of many weeks, burst into flame, and, though a few blows of her bundle of twigs or stamps of her feet put the first sparks out, she

had immediately to rush off in another direction to stifle another beginning. Up and down, up and down, across a space of two hundred yards, the brave woman raced with her branch in her hand. Her cap was lost, and, as usual, every hairpin gone in a very short space of time. Her face was blackened by soot and scorched by the intense heat. How long the combat lasted she knew not ; the danger seemed to thicken, and she was almost in despair.

Far beyond her place in the battle a little band of raiding sparks had advanced right among the pea haulms, which were dry and blazed like fury, at the foot of the farm garden. Still she fought on, her tongue parched, and her brow fevered, and her arm ready to drop with fatigue. But the blazing pea haulms, giving as they did a fiercer, brighter light than the rest of the fire, proved the alarm signal to the nearest neighbours, two miles away at the lake head.

Captain Raleigh was trotting slowly along by the banks of his watery estate, planning many things. His thoughts were often turned to the lass from Yorkshire, but just now he was looking intently at the group of islands and designing a few improvements in the place in case of important alterations in his home affairs. But a whiff of smoky air swept past him, and, turning round to look towards the point of the compass where his thoughts so often swung, he saw the distinct light of the burning garden stuff.

The captain had won more than one cup in regimental steeplechases, had crossed country

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with the Pytchley hounds in the record run of many seasons, but never had cup or brush spurred him on as now ; he covered those two miles of open prairie in fewer minutes than it takes to tell it. Just one shout had he given to Churchill as he galloped headlong past that veteran, at work with his pretty favourite, and they followed as fast as they could.

When the ex-cavalry officer charged up to the scene of action, Ruth was well-nigh beaten. She was no beauty at the moment ; her dress was bedraggled and torn, her face like a chimney-sweep's, and her hair like a gipsy's, but Raleigh was far too busy stemming the rush of their fiery foe to care for drawing-room toilets. Side by side the two worked, without a word, sternly, grimly, doggedly. And yet all around the Lakeside holding raged a dense wall of fire ; some of the nearest crops were already burnt beyond hope of saving, and the gale seemed to rise higher every minute.

Mary was the next on the scene of action, having outstripped her old friend by several hundred yards. "Water, Mary, water," gasped Ruth, clutching her branch still in her hand and struggling on. "Something for us to drink !—quick, child !" And well was her patient training repaid : the child knew in a moment what to do, and brought to the fighting-line not only water, but lime-juice with it, in a great jug.

The sun was sinking in the west before all danger was past ; the cloud of smoke and flame had swept by the homestead, baffled and sullen, denied a choice morsel of fuel.

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But as it rushed on for three long days and nights across the sun-dried plains of the North-West, more than a hundred hay-ricks and ten farmhouses and outbuildings were left in ashes behind it.

Ruth fairly collapsed when all was over, and, for the first time in many years, had a real good womanly weep. Her whole nervous system had been strung up to extra pitch, and the coming of Captain Raleigh just in the very nick of time, when despair had overcome her, stimulated her to yet more exertion than even her robust frame could stand.

Soon the family party returned, in dread of finding a ruined homestead where so much peace and plenty had reigned that morning, for the smell and sight of the fire had reached them as they hurried back. When the buggy drew up with its two outriders, Tom and Oliver, the first person they saw was Captain Raleigh at the open window, holding up his forefinger and saying—

“Hush! she’s asleep at last. The farm is saved, and Ruth has done it, but it was terribly exhausting; please don’t disturb her with any noise.”

Yes, the farm was saved, but Mr. Nettleton lost his niece, or, at least, she left his particular care for the still more particular care of her comrade at the prairie fireside. And he had arranged it all in a very few words, by suggesting that, as they had succeeded so well together on that occasion, they should share one fireside in future, and halve their anxieties in doing so.

Great was the dismay in the home at Ragington when the news that Ruth had, in a second three months, followed the example of Topsy and settled down on the Canadian prairies, without any fuss about an elaborate trousseau or a dreary waiting before going home with the man of her heart. Mrs. Evans, as she went about her household chores in Yorkshire, missed her daughter Ruth above a bit. She grumbled at the thoughtless lassie who had been wooed and wed without coming back to consult her poor old mother, forgetting that Brother John had offered to come across the herring-pond himself and fetch her over to grace the wedding feast.

And it was not for another year and for a still greater occasion that the elderly stay-at-home ventured forth on the perilous ocean, bound for Ruth Raleigh's quarters in Spennus Cottage.

The glow of a lovely Indian summer overspread the sky. Nature was in her sweetest mood, so sweet that none but those who have passed the season of summer flies, evening mosquitoes, and scorching heat can realise. At the door of the pretty chalet sat Ruth, rather paler than of yore, but happy, too deeply happy for words. A boat shaped like a Venetian gondola came gliding up the lake, with the active figure of her husband standing up, as he skilfully sent the craft along with his long paddle. At the new landing-stage he leapt ashore, and handed out a stout party in old-fashioned West Riding bonnet and shawl. As Ruth held aloft in her arms a wee mortal

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wrapped in swaddling clothes, Grandmother Evans bustled up to the porch to embrace this new visitor, Jack Raleigh, the heir of Spenrus Cottage, with her old familiar words, "There's now't so sweet as a babby."

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